DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 263 652 EA 018 012

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TITLE Beyond Effective Schools to Good Schools: Some First Steps.
INSTITUTION Oregon Univ., Eugene. Center for Educational Policy and Management.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 85
NOTE 9p.
AVAILABLE FROM Publication Sales, Center for Educational Policy and Management, College of Education, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403 ($.35).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
JOURNAL CIT R&D Perspectives; Spr 1985

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Change Strategies; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; *Institutional Characteristics; *Institutional Environment; School Effectiveness; Teacher Administrator Relationship

ABSTRACT

Research indicates that the characteristics of schools can affect student performance. School improvement reforms depend on the involvement of individual teachers and administrators, but research also suggests that individuals are more likely to commit themselves to change when a positive, supportive change environment pervades the entire organization. The good school can be characterized as one that follows processes identified as conducive to school improvement. In addition to exhibiting the high standardized test scores typical of effective schools, good schools exhibit high student performance in behavioral, vocational, and cognitive areas, and serve all students equitably. Quickly implemented characteristics typical of good schools include school site management, strong leadership, staff stability, curricular articulation and organization, schoolwide staff development, parental and community involvement, schoolwide recognition of academic success, maximization of learning time, and district support of change. More slowly implemented characteristics include collaborative planning and collegial relationships, a sense of community, the sharing of goals and high expectations, and order and discipline. First steps in a change program should involve communicating fully with the staff, placing staff representatives in leadership roles, reviewing the school climate, and developing a workable change program based on clear goals. (PGD)

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Beyond Effective Schools to Good Schools: Some First Steps

by Stewart C. Purkey and Susan Degen

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R&D Perspectives is a quarterly publication of CEPM, edited by Jo Ann Mazzarella. Linda Lumsden is in charge of production. Graphics are created by Sheila Brown. Additional copies are available from CEPM Publications for a cost of $ .35 per copy. We welcome your comments.

EA 018 012

Stewart Purkey is Head of Secondary Education in the College of Education at the University of Oregon and is best known for his work with Marshall Smith on school effectiveness. *The following article was adapted by Susan Degen from a lengthy presentation Purkey made to Oregon school administrators at the Division of Educational Policy and Management's "Executive Leadership" Seminar in January. Its purpose is to share findings and insights of most interest to administrators. Purkey first looks at some diverse research findings that support not only the conclusions of the effective schools research but also some of his own conclusions about schools. The heart of the article contains Purkey's conception of "good" schools (as distinct from "effective" schools) and offers some first steps for district administrators or principals who are attempting to create such good schools.*

The authors wish to thank Kenneth Duckworth and Jane Arends for helpful suggestions on an earlier version of this article.

Beginning with Wilbur Brookover's work at Michigan State in 1968, research has revealed that some schools do a better job of educating children than do other schools having similar student populations. This discovery, based on research methods that actually looked into the school and the classroom rather than relying on input/output models, is both encouraging and sobering. It is encouraging because it offers some new models for making systematic changes in schools that may increase student performance. The discovery is also sobering because it suggests that, contrary to what some educators have believed, it really is possible to improve the achievement of low-income students in basic skills, that schools can reduce (though not eliminate) the impact of students' backgrounds on school achievement, and that, therefore, educators cannot excuse poor student performance simply by pointing to a disadvantaged home environment.

The research on effective schools has many methodological weaknesses that have been discussed elsewhere (e.g., MacKenzie 1983; Purkey and Smith 1983; Rowan, Bossert, and Dwyer 1983). At the very least, it is important to remember that only a narrow sample of schools was studied. The urban inner-city elementary schools in the study may not have much in common with a high school

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in white, upper-middle-class Beaverton, Oregon, or an isolated rural elementary school in Moses Lake, Washington. In spite of such weaknesses, however, the effective schools research is strengthened by other research that supports many of its findings. Much of the research on implementation, organizational theory, and workplace reform points in the same direction as the conclusions drawn from the school effectiveness literature. This related research also supports some conceptions about good schools (as distinct from effective schools) that will be presented later.

Supporting Research

In general, the implementation research done by, among others, Fullan (1982) and Berman and McLaughlin (1977) suggests that the fate of most reforms rests in the hands of those who implement them—teachers and administrators at the school level. Therefore, those who control the outcomes should be involved both in decisions on what to implement and in the actual implementation process itself. Moreover, because schools seem to be relatively idiosyncratic organizations (despite all their commonalities), an innovation that is tailored to the specific needs of a particular school will be more likely to be embraced by its staff. Involving people in the decision-making process gives them a sense of ownership and control over the reform, which is the most effective way to generate a sense of commitment to the innovative process and create the necessary flexibility to address local conditions and needs.

A second area of research that supports the conclusions about good schools comes from organizational theory. Given the political nature of schools, change strategies that rely on cooperation and that focus on creating coalitions both within the school and between the school and outside groups (such as district offices and community organizations) are those most likely to overcome organizational segmentation and bring about change.

These days everyone talks about schools being "loosely coupled" (Weick 1976) to indicate that what goes on in each classroom is independent from what goes on in the office or in other classrooms. This perception of loose coupling may exist in part because no one is really sure what schools should be doing or how they should be doing it. But more importantly, schools may appear to be "loosely coupled" systems because of the political organization of districts and buildings. Within secondary schools, for example, there are competing groups, each with its own vested interests and spheres of influence to protect: the coaches, the English teachers who have been there since 1945, the people who play cards in the faculty lounge during breaks, the custodians, and so on. Each group has a similar, loosely-defined common purpose in education, but the groups have nothing solid pulling them together to work towards that purpose unless coalitions among the various segments are created that can respond to a clear vision of what the school should be doing.

The third body of research supporting my contentions about good schools is the literature on workplace reform. Books such as O'Toole's (1981) *Making America Work* and R.M. Kanter's (1983) *The Change Masters* identify a corporation's culture as a key factor that contributes to its high productivity and profits. Both O'Toole and Kanter argue that reforming the workplace to make it competitive and innovative requires altering the culture of the firm. The way to do this, they suggest, is to increase employee participation in solving problems, setting goals, and selecting work procedures—in other words, giving lower-level employees more control and allowing them to participate in decision making.

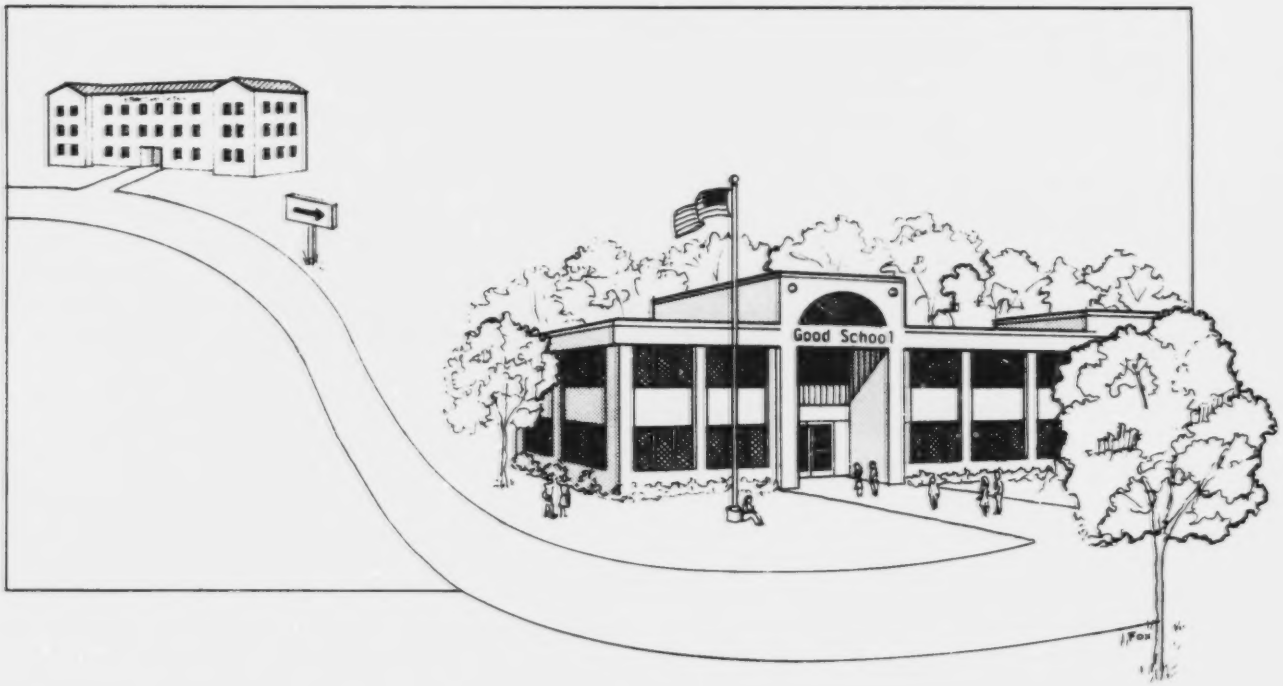
Participation, of course, is meaningless if it is only token participation. For instance, I once served as a teacher representative on a district-wide curriculum team. Each time the superintendent came in with a curriculum plan, the assistant superintendent would say, "This is the plan that we've been working with. What do you teachers think?" We would all nod, and that would be the extent of our input. What I am suggesting here is something far more real and substantial.

A good school goes beyond just emphasizing basic skills acquisition to encompass a variety of goals.

The workplace reform literature of O'Toole (1981) also assumes that organizational structure is easier to change than is the individual psychology of those who work in an organization. The message for schools is that initially it is easier to change school structures that can influence the behavior of the entire staff than it is to get individual teachers and building administrators to think about education in new ways, alter deeply held beliefs, or adopt radically different patterns of behavior.

Finally, it is what happens in a

classroom—the interaction between student and teacher—that determines what and how much the student learns. Before we can hope to alter teachers' instructional behaviors, however, it may be necessary for us to create an organizational culture conducive to innovation and risk-taking to maximize staff involvement in decisions affecting their professional lives (see Little 1982). In other words, we may need to address the school as a whole in order to create an environment in which the people in the classrooms will feel sufficiently safe and supported to be willing to make the changes necessary to alter teaching and learning.



Good Schools

An effective school is usually narrowly defined as one in which students score higher than expected on standardized tests of basic skills, given their socioeconomic status. A good school, however, the kind of school that I want to discuss, incorporates but goes beyond this definition. In a good school students perform well in a number of areas. They exhibit social responsibility and ethical behavior, acquire vocational skills and good work habits, and develop higher order thinking skills (such as problem solving, creative thinking, or critical thinking). More importantly, a good school is an equitable school, one that meets the needs of all students, whether they are at the top or the bottom of the ability scale. A good school then goes beyond just emphasizing basic skills acquisition to encompass a variety of goals.

This broad definition of a good school reminds us that schools serve a range of social and intellectual purposes and that these can differ somewhat between schools and among school populations. An expanded definition, then, increases the likelihood that greater numbers of parents, students, staff, and community members can embrace and support the school's program.

The difference between today's reform movement to create good schools and previous reform movement efforts is interesting. Many panaceas over the years suggested to administrators that if they operated schools a certain way—by goal-based management, for example—their schools would improve. But no one ever made the goals of these improvement programs specific. Similarly, other new educational technologies

such as team teaching, open classrooms, and modular scheduling were heralded as offering the solution to certain educational problems, but educators were generally never told how to implement such techniques. Moreover, since no one ever talked about what the ultimate purposes of reform were, educators seemed to be uncertain about the relationship of all these specific activities to the rest of the school experience. In other words, these fairly narrow approaches to school reform were based on the assumption that by tinkering with the engine or by changing the adjustment on the carburetor, schools would automatically run better.

In contrast, today's reform movement assumes that the processes we use to improve schools are also characteristics of a good school. This movement tries to bridge the ends-means dichotomy by merging them. Therefore, the characteristics I will discuss here are both ways to make schools better and criteria to use in evaluating whether, in fact, a school is functioning as a healthy, vital organism.

Thirteen Characteristics of Good Schools

I am going to offer a list of thirteen characteristics of good schools (Purkey and Smith 1983). Given the state of the research these characteristics are based on, the list should be used as a guide rather than as a template. A good school may not have all thirteen or only these thirteen characteristics, but it is likely that a good school will have a substantial number of them. Moreover, two different schools that are equally good may have a different mix of these characteristics or possess the same ones in different degrees.

The first characteristic of a good school is *school site management*. A number of studies indicate that a school's administrators and staff need considerable freedom in determining exactly how to increase student performance. Because culture varies from school to school, administrators need the flexibility to tailor programs to the specific needs of schools. Two years ago I studied six urban high schools that had tremendously different cultures—even those only a mile or two apart.

Today's reform movement assumes that the processes we use to improve schools are also characteristics of a good school.

This means that school site management—increasing the decision-making responsibility of staff in each school—is important. Although district administrators should not just allow staffs to do whatever they please, both principals and teachers should be given substantial control over decisions about their own workplace.

The second characteristic found in a good school is *leadership*. This leadership may come from the principal or from others on the school's staff. It is popularly believed that the principal is the only person who can create a good school culture and that he or she must shoulder the full responsibility for reform. However, although leadership is absolutely necessary for reform, it may come from other sources, such as an assistant principal or a guidance counselor or a core group of teachers. For example, five teachers at a high school I am familiar with in the midwest planned a school improvement program, got a grant from the Ford Foundation, put their program into effect, and made some substantial changes in their building. The principal, in this instance, was no more than an enthusiastic and visible supporter of staff initiative and leadership.

Third, good schools seem to have a high degree of *staff stability*. Moving faculty into and out of the building—particularly if the principal has no say about the hiring or transferring of staff—may destroy the staff cohesion necessary to a productive school culture. This is true of routine administrative transfers of principals as well because principals set the tone in most schools. Likewise, the practice, common in larger districts, of moving outstanding principals into the central office may reduce school effectiveness at the building level. Interestingly, the most innovative companies in the private sector, the ones most able to change in order to meet the needs of the marketplace, seem to be those that try to maintain a stable work force. In most cases, therefore, the more a school can maintain a stable staff, the better.

The fourth characteristic is *curriculum articulation and organization*. At the secondary school level, a planned and purposeful core of courses designed by schools and districts seems to be more academically helpful than many electives with few requirements. Although many believe an articulated, organized curriculum that emphasizes academic subjects may be the key to academic achievement, and although we educators do pay attention to scope and sequence in grades K-12, we still do not spend enough time horizontally integrating subject matter within each grade level. I find compelling Sizer's (1984) suggestion that schools need a rich, in-depth, core curriculum, where students go into the same kinds of subjects a little more deeply each time around,

instead of the wide variety of electives and curriculum tracks now prevalent.

The fifth characteristic of a good school is *school-wide staff development.* In order to influence an entire school, staff development should be a school-wide effort rather than tailored to the particular needs of individual teachers. School-wide staff development can help create a new school culture by removing teachers from their daily routines so that they can interact with different people, develop a common language, and forge common understandings and goals. It should also be closely related to the school's instructional program and to school needs the teachers have recognized. Too many staff development programs are like parachute supply drops: an expert is brought in to talk for a day or an hour, and after that no more is heard about the presentation. Many administrators still assume that they can influence teachers with the right motivational speaker, but if that speaker does not address school needs, that speaker's influence is going to be minimal. Effective, ongoing staff development incorporates coaching, in which the presenters themselves or people they have trained are available for several weeks or months after the initial sessions to work with teachers or administrators.

Although district administrators should not just allow staffs to do whatever they please, both principals and teachers should be given substantial control over decisions about their own workplace.

Parental and community involvement and support is the sixth characteristic. To some extent schools have to operate as isolated microcosms when putting new policy into action because they often cannot wait to make badly needed changes until parents and the community lend support. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that if parents support school policies, especially those concerning homework, discipline, and attendance, and if the community rallies behind school improvement efforts, then student performance is likely to be positively influenced. Obtaining that involvement and support is, of course, not easy, and there is no single best way to do it. Schools typically approach the problem by focusing on how they can involve parents or community residents in school activities or projects. In other words, their concern is with securing community acceptance of the school's agenda. Perhaps a more effective approach would be to involve parents and the community as much as possible in *setting* the agenda on the reasonable assumption that commitment and support follow meaningful participation in decision making.

School-wide recognition of academic success is the seventh characteristic. The hallways of most schools display trophies for athletic achievement, but until recently these important symbols of school culture were not ordinarily used to recognize academic success. Since becoming aware of this inconsistency, schools are now using symbols such as trophies to recognize academic as well as athletic achievement. Similarly, IBM and other large corporations hold pep rallies and create company songs, company mottos, and even company histories as ways to increase performance and employee commitment to the organization. Clearly schools can do the same, and many are beginning to follow suit.

The eighth characteristic is *maximized learning time*—getting students to spend more time on school work both in school and outside of school. Administrators must ensure that the classroom is held sacred: that strangers do not come into the classroom; that messengers do not come from the office; that students are not pulled out of class to go on athletic trips or field trips. As important as extracurricular activities may be, nothing should interrupt what happens in the classroom. It is also particularly important that high school students and, perhaps, low ability elementary students be required to do academic work outside of the school. Thus, schools should have a homework policy that is set by the building staff—not by district or state policy—to fit the needs of their own students. If possible, administrators should also create a program that involves parents in monitoring homework.

Moving faculty into and out of the building—particularly if the principal has no say about the hiring or transferring of staff—may destroy the staff coehsion necessary to a productive school culture.

The final characteristic in the first group of characteristics is *district support.* Change at the school level will be limited unless the central office supports it. As a matter of policy, the district should work with the schools to create these characteristics.

Administrators can put the previous

nine characteristics into action quickly, often by mandate. These nine characteristics establish the context and set the tone for four additional characteristics that define a school's culture and help develop a positive school climate. These last four will evolve slowly and naturally within the context established by the first nine characteristics. Over time the resulting school culture and climate will promote academic success.

The tenth characteristic is *collaborative planning and collegial relationships.* This is perhaps the characteristic that is the most powerful mechanism for school improvement because it is directly concerned with the process. School improvement is more likely to succeed if teachers and administrators make decisions together and share ideas and information. Even in small schools, teachers at one end of the building often have no idea about what is going on at the other end. Administrators responsible for one program, such as athletics, often have no idea about what is going on in other school programs. Collaboration and collegiality are absolutely essential to bring faculty and staff together.

There is persuasive evidence that the sense of being a recognizable member of a distinct, supportive community tends to reduce alienation and increase achievement.

The eleventh characteristic, the second in this group of four, is *sense of community.* There is persuasive evidence that the sense of being a recognizable member of a distinct, supportive community tends to reduce alienation and increase achievement. Schools can build this feeling of belonging and security by using ceremony and symbols. For example, parochial schools that still require school uniforms often have that sense of community. Certainly, religious ideology helps, but common uniforms, rituals, and ceremonies create it too. The sense of community is important because neither alienated students nor teachers dissatisfied with their jobs will perform well. Vandalism and absenteeism are some of the results of lack of a sense of community in schools.

Clear goals and high expectations that are commonly shared is the twelfth characteristic. Having a clear goal allows people to focus their energy. High expectations of student achievement and performance are likewise important in producing high academic achievement. We do not push most of our students hard enough. We must be careful, however, not to transform such expectations into impossibly high standards that can hurt students. For instance, I know of a student who worked on four or five drafts of a paper for an English class with the help of another teacher. When the student finally had what she and the helping teacher thought was an adequate paper, she turned it in to her English teacher. The teacher gave the student a "D" on the paper. The teacher's reason was not based on the quality of the paper itself as much as it was based on her contention that she had high expectations for her students and knew that this girl would never be able to meet those expectations. Not only is such an attitude patent nonsense, but the impact on the student was devastating. So, as important as high expectations are, if they are too high or too inflexible they may drive some students out of school.

The last characteristic of a good school is *order and discipline.* The seriousness and purposefulness with which a school approaches its task is evident in the discipline maintained in the building—the orderly, calm, efficient manner in which a building functions. The principals highlighted in national magazines as having transformed particularly poor schools into good schools generally seem to have first established order in the building. For example, they stood at the doorway as kids entered the building and took their radios away, and they made sure the neighborhood punks stayed out. That was often the first step to turning the school around academically. I would also suggest that administrators periodically review their schools' discipline code and create a committee of students and faculty responsible for reviewing and administering it. Those rules, once agreed upon, must be enforced fairly and consistently so that the students feel they are treated equitably.

Some First Steps

There is no one best recipe for bringing about a school improvement program, but I would like to briefly outline the first steps I would follow if I were a building principal trying to formulate a plan.

I would begin by honestly characterizing to my staff the true situation in the school. If there were major problems, I would admit that all is not well in the school or, if it were more appropriate, I would suggest that, although there are no major problems in the school, there is still room for improvement. Almost 60 percent of teachers surveyed at the end of the effective schools project I studied

said that the single most positive thing about the project was the recognition that change was needed. They felt someone had finally listened to them.

The second thing that I would do is select a leadership team made up of teachers who have the most influence on the other staff including one building union representative. I would also put at least one classified staff member on it, perhaps a custodian and certainly the principal's secretary, the one person whose fingers are usually on the pulse of the whole school. I would strongly recommend that the principal be involved with the leadership team, at least to the extent of supporting it, being available whenever its members need advice, publicizing what they are doing, and reinforcing their work. That does not mean having veto power over all the team's decisions; rather, it means granting them the freedom to be creative and even to make mistakes. Chances are that one of the leadership team's first decisions will be to tighten discipline policies or to create a new detention policy. While this may not be the most appropriate way to change students' behavior, decisions that the team makes together should be respected. The administrator's role is to guide team members in making more informed decisions instead of vetoing the ones they make. By relying on the team members, the principal tells them that their expertise and experience is valued. That is an important message for them to receive.

My third step would be to ask the leadership team to develop a cultural portrait of the school using the thirteen characteristics (or another comprehensive set of indicators) as a framework. This portrait should be based on an analysis of the school's present culture as those within the school perceive it. Whether the cultural portrait is created in small group meetings—ideally in a nonschool setting—or in discussion sections during a large staff meeting or in some other way, it is important for the leadership team to begin the process of developing a complete picture of the school's culture. Change without such important information is simply a mindless activity.

One principal told me that the school improvement program he developed helped him set priorities and cut through the routine administrative work that so often overwhelms principals.

Fourth, I would evaluate the school's cultural profile with the faculty and, using the same leadership team or one newly created (perhaps with slightly wider representation), write a school improvement plan based on the profile that has clear, attainable goals that can be measured or evaluated over time. One principal told me that the school improvement program he developed helped him set priorities and cut through the routine administrative work that so often overwhelms principals. A written school improvement program also unifies faculty and focuses their attention and energy on specific goals. Everyone should see that plan—teachers, classified staff, the school board, the district office, the PTA—so that the administrator can mobilize support to get the extra resources necessary to change the school. Moreover, circulating the school improvement program puts pressure on everyone, making it harder to sidetrack the plan. Administrators can hold school board members and others to the plan that everyone agreed to at the beginning of the year, thereby avoiding later board or district office requests to change the plan in midstream.

The fifth step I would take is to make sure that there is a clear timeline for due dates and a way to make sure everyone knows who is responsible for what. The leadership team should coordinate school improvement and keep everyone aware of the progress of the improvement program by giving periodic updates throughout the year.

My sixth step would be to establish a mechanism that supports innovation and maintains momentum. This involves continually reinforcing good performance. In her 1982 study of principals of unusually successful schools, Judith Little found that these principals encouraged the faculty to be innovative and to take risks, continually reinforced and supported that kind of behavior, and talked about it in the lunch room, in faculty meetings, and elsewhere. Reinforcing good behavior works.

Lastly, all of this requires district office support. Thus, my final step would be to arrive at an agreement with the central office that allows the principal more time to concentrate on the important tasks of running a school. Some principals assign all their administrative work to a good secretary or a guidance counselor or the assistant principal, but that is not always possible.

Conclusion

As a process for school-wide planning and improvement becomes established, as people become

familiar with the concepts and comfortable with the process, administrators can move on, over time, to addressing more difficult issues like instruction, classroom management, and the curriculum—the things that we have not yet been very successful at changing. But first administrators must take time to build up commitment, energy, and enthusiasm.

This seems to be the process followed by many schools, with some variation, when they begin a school improvement program—although many are far more sophisticated than anything that I have outlined here. I have been tremendously impressed with what people at the school level and in the district office come up with as they plan their school improvement programs. Though it has become fashionable these days—or perhaps it always has been—to attack public school teachers and administrators, I think the public will find that lasting, fundamental changes in our schools cannot take place without drawing upon the talents of those same teachers and administrators who are being maligned. And in a sense that is what I have been suggesting here, that when we draw on the abilities of local school personnel, provide them with guidance and resources, and then hold them responsible, we are far more likely to end up with good schools than if we try to mandate good schools into existence at the state or federal level.

Note: A fuller discussion of many of the policy issues discussed here can be found in an article by Stewart C. Purkey and Marshall S. Smith appearing in the Elementary School Journal, *Volume 85, No. 3, (January 1985), pages 353-389.*

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